

The Politics of Metamorphosis:
Cultural Transformation in David Malouf's *Remembering Babylon*

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David Malouf's *Remembering Babylon* (1993) can be seen as a bid for political correctness on the part of a writer who had never before registered the weight of Aboriginal experience in the scales of Australian cultural identity. Appearing as it did in the international context of the Year of Indigenous Peoples, but also, in Australia, at the time of the Mabo debate (when the Aborigines were given new legal visibility and presence in the eyes of the general public in this country),¹ Malouf's new book may have seemed to strike the right kind of balance between eulogy (of the already much-celebrated pioneering spirit lying at the root of white Australian identity) and elegy (lamenting the loss of a darker side to the national psyche, hitherto suppressed in the very act of white self-definition). The structural centrality accorded in the novel to the character of Gemmy (a young Britisher rescued from shipwreck by some natives of Australia, who allow him to live in their midst for a number of years until he is drawn to an outpost of white settlement in Queensland), makes for an exploration of 'Australian-ness' as essentially 'geminate' or hybrid. Thus, though it is set in the first days of settlement, the book can be read as a latter-day rendering of the gemination of Australia after Mabo, which it encapsulates in the figure of Gemmy as he is first seen to be hovering on top of the fence standing between the paddock and the bush; between white and black; between Europe and its Other. On the face of it, then, *Remembering Babylon* strives to integrate the antipodean poles felt to be constitutive of a renewed, dual, dialectical sense of identity proper to Australians. Yet, as we shall see, Gemmy's poise on the top rail of the fence, where he hangs for a brief arrested moment with '[his] arms outflung as if preparing for flight',² already contains a hint of Malouf's readiness to disentangle himself from the 'sensuous particularity as well as [the] historical contingency'³ specific to any given cultural formation — he aspires to the post-cultural (universal) moment when such specificities are

¹ The 'Mabo' case, a philosophically and legally unprecedented decision taken by the High Court of Australia in 1993, 'has reversed the doctrine that Australia was legally an unoccupied or "waste" land (*terra nullius*) at the time of British occupation, and has found that the indigenous inhabitants, or at least certain of them, have rights in common law as land owners'. See Annette Hamilton, 'After Mabo', *Cultural Studies*, 9.1 (1995), 191. This is a review-article of Tim Rowse's book, *After Mabo: Interpreting Indigenous Traditions* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1993).

² David Malouf, *Remembering Babylon* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1993), p._3. Further references to this edition are given in the text.

³ We borrow these phrases from Edward W. Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (London: Faber & Faber, 1984), p. 39.

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transcended into the (mythical) time of metamorphosis and accession to a 'higher' form of being. By this token it would appear that the representation of Australian culture as Janus-faced or 'geminate' obtains here not so much for its historical accuracy or truthfulness to a particular configuration momentarily realized in Australia,⁴ as it does for the way in which it metaphorizes the phenomenon of cultural displacement or change⁵ — which does tend to come to pass in the test tube of contemporary Australian society, and elsewhere.

However, this metaphorical strain does not prevent Malouf from considering himself a (creative) scribe of culture in Australia, who sees it as his own vocation to 'mythologize' the country's history and national experience in such a way that he might find, or forge, 'real spiritual links between us and the landscape, us and the cities, us and the lives we live here'.⁶ Immediately, of course, this raises questions about whom this 'us' encompasses. Malouf's probing of an Australian font of defining experience, which achieves epic proportions in *Fly Away Peter* (1982) and *The Great World* (1990), tends to address primarily the attempts by European migrants to come to terms with a land perceived as amenable to foreign inscription; and while his inordinate emphasis on the role of the imagination in the construction of self testifies, in truly post-colonial fashion, to a sense of freedom from Eurocentric ontological frames, it should be pointed out that Malouf never admits to the logic of exclusion underlying his exploration of the

⁴ Sneja Gunew reminds us that, however crucial (if highly mediated) the role played by Aborigines in the fashioning of a distinctive Australian identity, the mystique of the land at work here should not conceal the "dangerous supplement" deriving from a third or half [. . .] of the population [which] inevitably changes the genealogy or legitimating myth of origins' prevailing in Australian culture. Gunew is of course referring to the white, though non-Anglo-Celtic, constituency in Australia, an awareness of which forces us to consider Malouf's bipolar evocation of cultural identity as symbolic (or schematic) rather than realistic. See Sneja Gunew, 'Denaturalizing Cultural Nationalisms: Multicultural Readings of Australia', in *Nation and Narration*, ed. by Homi K. Bhabha (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 99-120.

⁵ In our opinion Germaine Greer's critique of *Remembering Babylon*, as manifesting 'not simply a reticence where Aborigines are concerned, [. . .] but a genuine ignorance by incuriosity', is invalidated by the emphasis on historical accuracy; this is to miss the allegorical thrust of Malouf's book, in which realistic truthfulness may never have been the prime intention. See Germaine Greer, 'Malouf's Objectionable Whitewash', *The Age* [Melbourne], 3 November 1993, 11. For an assessment of the impact of Greer's intervention in what came to be known as the Malouf controversy, see Suvendrini Perera, 'Unspeakable Bodies: Representing the Aboriginal in Australian Critical Discourse', *Meridian*, 13.1 (May 1994), 15-26.

⁶ Julie Copeland, 'Interview with David Malouf', *First Edition* (Sydney: ABC Radio, 15 August 1985); quoted in Philip Neilsen, *Imagined Lives: A Study of David Malouf* (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1990), p. 2.

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relationship between 'us and the landscape' — except perhaps in *12 Edmondstone Street* (1985) where he concedes that 'we discount the abos'.⁷ Similarly there is another passage, at the beginning of *Harland's Half Acre* (1984), which points to the political dilemma involved in imaginative possession. As often, Malouf here ponders on the power implicit in the act of naming, suggesting that the early Irish settlers of Killarney (a town south of Brisbane) only had to breathe the name to effect 'a recovery and return' of their place of origin in Europe; so that 'possession was easy' though it may have been replicating, in the realm of language, the 'brief bloody encounter [which] established the white man's power and [. . .] was soon made official with white man's law'.⁸ By extrapolation, it can be argued that Malouf's practice as a novelist only furthers native dispossession — since he too works to lay new foundations of experience in Australia, with no great regard for the country's pre-colonial history. This, clearly, draws attention to the ambiguity of the post-colonial stance assumed in the settler colonies by white intellectuals who, despite tremulous protestations to the contrary,⁹ sometimes appear to side with the conquerors rather than the victims.¹⁰

It is no coincidence, therefore, that *Remembering Babylon* has been criticized for its stereotypical representation of Aborigines, indeed for the very fact that a white writer should arrogate to himself the right to represent Aboriginal culture — however much this may have to be qualified in view of the text's readiness to acknowledge distance, since 'we only really glimpse the blacks by proxy, through the agency of Gemmy, whose white roots allow us limited access to a world partially denied him for that very reason'.¹¹ The problem of white

⁷ David Malouf, *12 Edmondstone Street* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1986), p. 44.

⁸ David Malouf, *Harland's Half Acre* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1985), p. 3.

⁹ The nativist temptation has sometimes been strong for white colonials who, in their attempts to break free of Europe's shadow, approached Aboriginal culture as a source of ready-made (if formulaic) identity. This attitude is at least lurking in many Manichaeian indictments of Europe as uniformly imperialistic. For a lucid warning against this see Hena Maes-Jelinek, 'Teaching Past the Posts', in *Liminal Postmodernisms: The Postmodern, the (Post-)Colonial, and the (Post-)Feminist*, ed. by Theo D'haen and Hans Bertens (Amsterdam/Atlanta: Rodopi, 1995), pp. 139-40.

¹⁰ The importance of discriminating between settler colonies and Third-World states, in terms of the kind of post-colonial practice to be developed, has been repeatedly underlined in recent years. See, for example, Simon During, 'Postcolonialism and Globalization', *Meanjin*, 51 (1992), 339-53; or Elleke Boehmer, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 213-22.

¹¹ Justin D'Ath, 'White on Black', *Australian Book Review*, 154 (September 1993), 39.

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representations of native life (in literature and elsewhere) in turn brings with it wider questions about the legitimacy of at all depicting cultures felt to be carrying a seal of authenticity — and hence to be incommensurable or, ultimately, incommunicable. For surely the point that 'the literary representation of Aborigines by white writers has become a contentious issue'¹² implies the view that, as Edward W. Said puts it in his celebrated *Orientalism* (1978), 'only a black can write about blacks, only a Muslim about Muslims, and so forth';¹³ as if cultures revolved in their own orbits, rather like the planets. Said, for one, disputes the notion that 'there are geographical spaces with indigenous, radically "different" inhabitants who can be defined on the basis of some religion, culture, or racial essence proper to that geographical space'.¹⁴ But this anti-essentialism, useful though it may be as a warning against 'the seductive degradation of knowledge'¹⁵ which comes to pass in the self-enclosed space of *national(ist)* formations, fails to answer some of the questions which Said himself eventually butts against: 'How does one represent other cultures? What is *another* culture?'¹⁶

Said's own response to the conundrum of cultural representation is at best hesitant and contradictory. It is partly an effect of his abhorrence for essentialist positions that he aspires, in his recent *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), for 'a synthesis represented by a war of liberation, for which an entirely new post-nationalist *theoretical* culture is required'.¹⁷ It is far from clear, however, how such a 'theoretical' culture might be couched in actual discourse, Said's only indication being that, partly as a result of empire, cultures are bound to become more and more 'involved in one another; none is [any longer] single and pure, all are hybrid, heterogeneous, extraordinarily differentiated, and unmonolithic'.¹⁸ The whole thrust of Said's work in fact derives from his perception that cultural notations always fall short of this 'unmonolithic' and ideal model, since he insists on the way in which even literary texts are subject to 'the settled, established, and domesticated dynamics of culture'.¹⁹ As Benita

¹² D'Ath, 'White on Black', 35.

¹³ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1991), p. 322.

¹⁴ Said, *Orientalism*, p. 322.

¹⁵ Said, *Orientalism*, p. 328.

¹⁶ Said, *Orientalism*, p. 325.

¹⁷ Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1993), p. 323; our emphasis.

¹⁸ Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, p. xxix.

¹⁹ Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, p. 403.

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Parry has shown,²⁰ the emphasis on ideological stricture, which consistently informs Said's reading of iconic texts in terms of 'the imperial process of which they were manifestly and unconcealedly a part',²¹ sometimes occurs at the expense of textual ambiguity or critical complexity. An obvious example is his framing of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* as a work whose 'politics and aesthetics are, so to speak, imperialist, which in the closing years of the nineteenth century seemed to be at the same time an aesthetic, politics, and even epistemology inevitable and unavoidable',²² leaves in the shade the extent to which Marlow's narrative is itself disrupted, and for the present-day reader epistemologically displaced, by the blind spots which hamper the perception of Africa and Africans. This points to an axiomatic tension at the heart of Said's thought, which relies heavily on what it denies in order to put forward a conception of culture as heterogeneous and internally differentiated. In the words of Abdul R. JanMohamed, he 'must affirm the value of infidelity to cultures, nations, groups, institutions, etc., to the extent that these are defined in monologic essentialist terms' in the first place.²³

Edward Said's struggle for accession to a theoretical plane of cultural projection is relevant to David Malouf's fiction, since his novels frequently stage an apocalyptic leap out of history as the boundary between human and other species (or between the animate and the inanimate) is crossed, and the narrative approaches the condition of post-colonial magic realism. This shift away from realism can perhaps be considered as Malouf's standard treatment of the paradigm of cultural change/closure. *An Imaginary Life* (1978) has remained famous for its lyrical exposition of a poetics of change:

Our bodies are not final. We are moving, all of us, in our common humankind, through the forms we love so deeply in each other, to what our hands have already touched in lovemaking and our bodies strain towards in each other's darkness. Slowly, and with pain, over centuries, we each move an infinitesimal space towards it. We are creating the lineaments of some final man, for whose delight we have prepared a landscape, and who can only be god.²⁴

²⁰ Benita Parry, 'Overlapping Territories and Intertwined Histories: Edward Said's Postcolonial Cosmopolitanism', in *Edward Said: A Critical Reader*, ed. by Michael Sprinker (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), pp. 19-47.

²¹ Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, p. xv.

²² Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, p. 26.

²³ Abdul R. JanMohamed, 'Worldliness-without-World, Homelessness-as-Home: Toward a Definition of the Specular Border Intellectual', in *Edward Said: A Critical Reader*, ed. by Michael Sprinker (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), p. 117.

²⁴ David Malouf, *An Imaginary Life* (Woollahra, NSW: Pan Books, 1984), p._29.

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However, the glib optimism of this passage should not be allowed to eclipse the darker implications involved in a quest impelled by what a critic has called the 'desire for disembodiment'.²⁵ The protagonist's 'final metamorphosis'²⁶ in this novel is preceded by the moment when '[b]eaked, furred, fanged, tusked, clawed, hooved, snouted, [the creatures] will settle in us, re-entering their old lives deep in our consciousness. And after them the plants, also themselves'.²⁷ This process later culminates in an unqualified relinquishing of identity, as the character yields to the urge to be absolutely 'open to all that [the moment] holds for [him]',²⁸ and gives himself over to the embrace of the earth as an attempt to be the landscape. At the level of the consciousness, this coincides with a discarding of language in favour of silence, considered to be more appropriate to the mystical apprehension of the universe as unified or whole. This is why the novel has been thought to side with the decreative forces of fusion and ultimate entropy, rather than with the life-affirming principles associated with all that is structured, organized, differentiated.²⁹ It could be argued that Malouf's sensibility is 'post-cultural' in the grimmer sense of that term; though it is also true that *An Imaginary Life* represents, in this respect, an extreme never again equalled in his subsequent works. In the words of Ivor Indyk, '[t]he experience of communion in *An Imaginary Life*, the dissolution of identity through immersion in the natural world, represents a condition which cannot really be surpassed, though it may continue as an ideal towards which Malouf's writing aspires'.³⁰

In *Remembering Babylon* Gemmy's disappearance into the landscape on a day of bushfires seems to echo the experience of dissolution described in the earlier novel, with this difference that it remains unclear here whether the boy goes to meet his death by fire, or simply wants to resume his former life with the Aborigines in what he remembers as 'a known landscape' (p. 181). What is certain is that his passage through fire brings with it an important metamorphosis, since in a land of bushfires '[o]ne life was burned up, hollowed out with flame, to crack the seeds from which new life would come; that was the law' (p. 181). It seems significant that Malouf should here conflate two forms of post-culturality — whether it is the negation of culture pure and simple (in a literal

²⁵ Ivor Indyk, *David Malouf* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press [Oxford Australian Writers series], 1993), p. 40.

²⁶ Malouf, *An Imaginary Life*, p. 96.

²⁷ Malouf, *An Imaginary Life*, p. 96.

²⁸ Malouf, *An Imaginary Life*, p. 152.

²⁹ See Veronica Brady, 'Making Connections: Art, Life, and Some Recent Novels', *Westerly*, 25.2 (1980), 61-74.

³⁰ Indyk, *David Malouf*, p. 36.

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kind of return to the womb of nature), or a more complex awareness of the epistemological (and existential) 'combinatory responses'³¹ brought about by the confrontation, and the partial inter-penetration, of formerly discrete cultures. As we see this, the point is that whatever form it takes the space of post-culturality is unknowable (the landscape is 'known' to Gemmy only) within the bounds of a specific code of representation — unless, perhaps, this code (Malouf's writing) were itself to undergo regenerative metamorphosis. In other words it may not be possible to follow Gemmy, wherever he is going when he leaves the settlement, in the framework of a book so deliberately entrenched in a white perspective. For the novel itself affirms its own cultural *limits*. And when this is acknowledged, accusations of ideological blindness simply no longer hold.

Indeed *Remembering Babylon* is a far from naive text in its dealings with matters of cultural representation. Not only does it scrupulously avoid speaking on behalf of the Other; but it also draws attention to the in-built capacity for change — to the protean defeat of stereotype — genetically inscribed within the cultural chromosome. This is apparent when Gemmy is interviewed by Mr Frazer, the minister, who sets out to write down the parameters of Gemmy's unknown life. It is in keeping with the book's particular perspective that such transcription should involve distortion, as well as a good deal of self-projection, on the part of the decipherer:

Mr Frazer [. . .] was practically breathing into the man's mouth, would offer syllables, words, anything to relieve the distress he felt at Gemmy's distress, so that they sat, at times, at a distance of just inches, hooting and shouting at one another; on Gemmy's side, odd bursts of sound, half-meanings at most; on the other, whole phrases that, whether or not they were quite what the man intended, found their way into what George Abbot set down. (p. 17)

But there is more to this than a mere case of cultural inscrutability and consequent misrecognition; for the text of Gemmy's life, such as it falls from Frazer's lips and however much it may become 'the minister's Colonial fairytale' (p. 19), suffers further adulteration at the hands of George Abbot, the school-teacher, who resents the humiliation of being asked to act as a passive pen-holder: 'Out of boredom, but also to set himself at a distance from the occasion and to register, if only in an obscure and indirect way, the contempt he felt at the minister's smugness, he had introduced into what he had just set down a phrase or two of his own' (p. 19). Abbot's interference amounts to introducing some 'satanic verses' into the no longer 'sacred' text of Gemmy's life: as if alteration were necessary for him to '[be] known' (p. 20). This knowledge is in turn disrupted as an effect, it seems, of people's

³¹ A phrase borrowed from Simon During, 'Waiting for the Post: Modernity, Colonization and Writing', *Ariel*, 20.4 (October 1989), 49.

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personal dealings with one another. Indeed Malouf approaches cultural metamorphosis more as a matter of inward, independent experience and transformation, than as the more haphazard 'productive energy of mutual misrecognitions'³² occurring on a global scale. As he himself declares, 'the imaginative world is to be discovered further in not further out'.³³ In other words cultural metamorphosis depends on the coming to fruition of some ingrained difference — so that the text of culture always already contains 'both the statement and the repudiation, verses and converses, universes and reverses, the whole thing'.³⁴

Our suggestion is indeed that Malouf's writing pursues an apprehension of 'the whole thing', so that the various themes and motifs which recur in his work, and which make up a 'grammar of composition'³⁵ within a political system of meaning, ought not to be taken as the expression of a militant, nationalistic, divisive brand of post-colonialism. To the contrary, it can be shown that *Remembering Babylon* gestures towards the delineation of some universal or 'naked essential humanity' (p. 179). Gemmy represents an important touchstone in this respect — or a gemstone with many facets which reflect, as in a shifting light, some pure water held in suspension. At the same time, there is a sense in which each cut in the diamond deflects from the contemplation of the whole. It is significant that Gemmy feels imprisoned in the settlement, where he withers away to the point when he seems to have 'lost all weight in the world', and 'passed through into another being' (p. 176); so that he has to reclaim the seven closely-written pages felt to be recording his life (and to have been stolen from him) in order to regain his integrity. Walking into the bush, he allows the magical squiggles to be washed out in a tropical downpour — an instance of erasure which corresponds to his own entry into a world where 'all the names of things, as he met them, even in their ashen form, shone on his breath, sprang up in their real lives about him, succulent green, soft paw and eyeball, muscle tense under fur' (p. 181). As we see this, Gemmy here relinquishes his hold on the language and culture of the whites, prior to stepping into an ideal (unfallen) realm where word and thing fit organically. Once again, this seems to make him into an emblem of sorts, perhaps of something akin to Said's *theoretical* culture which transcends the world of facts: '[H]is feet made so little impression in the dust that it was as if he had not passed' (p. 176).

³² During, 'Waiting for the Post', 47.

³³ Candida Baker, 'David Malouf' [Interview], in *Australian Writers Talk About Their Work* (Sydney: Pan Books, 1986), p. 255.

³⁴ Salman Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses* (Dover, Delaware: The Consortium, 1988), p. 123.

³⁵ Patrick Buckridge, 'Colonial Strategies in the Writing of David Malouf', *Kunapipi*, 8.3 (1986), 48.

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This does not mean, however, that Gemmy fails to exert influence, albeit a nebulous one, on the small community of people through which he flits like a comet. This is always an indirect, mediated form of attraction, as if Gemmy's role were to set an abstract direction for the characters' otherwise free-ranging metamorphosis. For example Janet McIvor registers the impact of the figure balanced on top of the fence: 'in the concentration of her gaze [. . .] he hung there still' (p. 36), like an unforgettable figurehead presiding over the changes bound to affect her in later life. Yet, however much Gemmy's aura continues to be felt, Janet's growth towards maturity owes nothing to him in terms of ordinary causality. Rather, what clinches her future is the epiphanic moment when she is swathed in 'a single cloud' of bees (p. 142) while tending her friend Mrs Hutchence's hives — so that she is drawn 'out of her personal mind into [the bees'] communally single one' (p. 141), and she submits herself 'to *their* side of things' (p. 140) in what comes across as one of the book's several insights into the 'new and separate mind' (p. 142) of otherness. Because the bees seem to have been attracted by the pubescent girl's flow of menstrual blood, it has been suggested that this mystical communion with the land — the swarm is a mixed one, in which 'the little stingless native bees' (p. 139) hold pride of place — inverts 'the more common sexual relations and practices of colonization' (as it is the white girl who suffers the assault), or at any rate provides 'an alternative genealogy for a narrative of uncontaminated, asexual and non-native hybridity'.³⁶ Thus, although the usual fire imagery surrounds Janet's transforming encounter with otherness and she is reduced, in Gemmy's eyes, to 'a charred stump, all crusted black and bubbling' (p. 144) — so that she is 'temporarily "blackened"' by the experience — this is a meeting with the Other which 'manages to avoid the anxieties of miscegenation at any level more threatening than the apiarian',³⁷ and the book can be said to perform no more than 'an ambiguous gesture towards "hybridity"'.³⁸

Again, though, the point is perhaps precisely that *Remembering Babylon* insists on its own cultural embeddedness, so much so that it dispenses with the quest for anything like 'a fantastic mythological congruence of elements', or an 'assimilation of contraries',³⁹ available in the condition of hybridity (albeit an 'ambiguous' one). Homi Bhabha's distinction between cultural diversity and cultural difference appears to be relevant here, to the extent that Malouf turns his back on a model of post-colonial self-definition predicated on the idea of cultural relativism and cross-fertilization

³⁶ Perera, 'Unspeakable Bodies', 19

³⁷ Perera, 'Unspeakable Bodies', 19.

³⁸ Perera, 'Unspeakable Bodies', 18.

³⁹ Wilson Harris, *Tradition, the Writer and Society: Critical Essays* (London: New Beacon Books, 1967), p. 60.

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(which, in any case, implies — as with Said — 'the representation of a radical rhetoric of the separation of totalized cultures that live unsullied by the intertextuality of their historical locations'),⁴⁰ in favour of a notion of cultural difference perceived as autonomous or inward-looking. It is doubtful, however, if Bhabha's differential theory of cultural representation, which seeks to introduce 'a temporality of the in-between'⁴¹ through the intervention of a 'movement of meaning' or 'a supplementary movement of writing',⁴² inspired by Derrida,⁴³ can ultimately elucidate Malouf's own approach to culture as internally marked by difference; though it is true that Malouf is sensitive to displacements of meaning brought into being in the act of enunciation. We have already referred to the ways in which the text of Gemmy's life was decentred in the very process of inscription; a similar shift can be traced in Mr Frazer's attempts to become 'the agency for translating' the landscape, as revealed to him by Gemmy, into 'these outlines on the page that were all pure spirit, the product of stillness and silent concentration' (p. 66). This is an effort of understanding and assimilation in which '[h]e did not often get it right', with the result that the problem of representational uncertainty at the crossroads between cultures is again highlighted — for '[t]o get a name wrong was comic but could also be blasphemous. In one case what emerged from Mr Frazer's mouth was an old man's testicle, in another, the tuber came out as a turd' (p. 67).

And yet, as usual with Malouf, these transcriptions and translations of the structured consciousness are eventually shoved aside to make way for the disembodied (and dehumanized) perspective of the land: all that the country would see of the would-be ethnographer was 'a shape, thin, featureless, that interposed itself a moment, like a mist or cloud, before the land blazed out in its full strength again and the shadow was gone, as if, in the long history of the place, it was too slight to endure, or had never been' (p. 68). This amounts to reasserting the primacy of nature in the face of cultural indeterminacy. It seems relevant that the metamorphosis of the characters should always be triggered off, in *Remembering Babylon*, not by an encounter with some cultural 'Other'

⁴⁰ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), p._34.

⁴¹ Homi K. Bhabha, 'DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation', in *Nation and Narration*, ed. by Homi K. Bhabha (London: Routledge, 1990), p._299.

⁴² Bhabha, *Nation and Narration*, p. 305.

⁴³ To Bhabha, culture is crossed by the *différance* of writing in ways which have to do less with misreadings and misappropriations across systems of meaning, than with 'the structure of symbolic representation itself'. See Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, p. 36; and of course Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. by Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 178.

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(whether or not this is symbolized by Gemmy), but by a confrontation with the natural world perceived in its more transcendental quality. In the case of Janet, it is significant that the real turning-point is identified not with her union with the bees but with the particular night, some time earlier, when she is drawn out of the house after her mother and she experiences a 'suspense of ordinary, daytime feeling' brought about by 'the tense and brittle strangeness with which the world was touched' (p. 125). Although this may have to do with the eerie 'play of clouds across moonlight', Janet becomes aware that the unique feel of the moment derives above all from 'some quality she had brought to it out of her sleep' (p. 125):

I am the one who is seeing all this, she thought.
That, as much as anything else, accounted for the nature
of what she saw. [. . .]
She was aware suddenly of being outside in the dark,
while the other children slept on in the house. (p. 125)

This sensation of *being-in-the-world* sets the pattern for a number of similar discoveries in a novel which explores the existential and metaphysical consequences of one's detachment from sociocultural bonds or habits of thought. Crucially there is a process of individuation at work here, which posits the priority of empirically concrete knowledge to all other knowledge inherited from culture.

This is clearest in the trajectory described by Jock, from social integration to alienation and 'the knowledge that there was a place out there where the self might stand alone' (p. 107). For someone like Jock who had always revelled in the easy companionship afforded by hard-working, mostly taciturn neighbours, and who had come to see the world 'not through his own eyes, out of some singular self, but through the eyes of a fellow who was always in company' (p. 106), the passage to loneliness and independence of mind is a disturbing one, which holds 'the possibility of a terrible desolation' (p. 104). It is interesting that although the 'disturbing confirmation of change' (p. 106) comes about as an effect of his tentative commitment to Gemmy, whose appearance on the scene corresponds to the moment when 'some area of difference, of suspicion' (p. 106) opens up between Jock and his friends, he has to admit that 'the difference must always have existed' (p. 106); and this realization hits him 'like a form of knowledge he [breaks] through to' (p. 107) after he takes stock of the world around him as if for the first time. His perceptions here, of a swarm of insects 'all suspended in their tiny lives in a jewel-like glittering' (p. 107), and of a nondescript bird dipping its beak into a river 'which was all a tangle of threads, bunched or running' (p. 107), give rise to images of separateness *within* an organic whole in movement; so that, in the eye of the beholder, all that is real comes to self-concentration in the form of a cosmic unity paradoxically pursued through the avenue of self-discovery.

There is a tension here, between self-seeking and self-liberating forms of exploration, which is registered in the novel's strange obsession with footwear details. For example,

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Jock when he watches the bird has 'his boots in mud' (p. 107), as a token probably of his deep rootedness in a particular physical/social/cultural environment; yet the spectacle of the creature drinking so transports him that 'his boots had no weight, [. . .] nor his heart, and he was filled with the most intense and easy pleasure' (p. 107). His delight is echoed in Janet's sense of exhilaration when, standing in the night, she perceives that '[t]he material of her mother's nightgown was all agitated moonlight, but the body inside it was dark, bulky, deeply rooted out there' (p. 124). The thick materiality of the body here appears to counterpoint the dissolving of identity suggested by the rippling moonlight. Janet herself will later keep 'her two feet planted square on the earth' (p. 143) even as she is given 'a new body' (p. 144) gathered into the disembodied sound of the bees (p. 142). And George Abbot, the schoolmaster who feels weighed down by a sensual nature and a 'discommodious body' (p. 89), is also granted the blessing of a moment when 'his whole being soar[s]' (p. 89) in a kind of transubstantiation of his unruly flesh.

Abbot greets the change like a welcome 'return to society' (p. 89) on the part of someone who had easily succumbed to the mental and physical torpor induced by colonial sloth. Interestingly, his sense of social ostracism was taking the form of a rigid attachment to 'the rigours of convention' (p. 44): so that, '[w]hen he was invited out, he was, often enough, the only one at the table wearing shoes' (p. 45). Now the scene of his social rehabilitation is the house fitted by Mrs Hutchence with 'an ironwork scraper at the door' (p. 84), with its suggestion that it is no place for dusty or mud-caked boots. Again, then, the elevation of being experienced by the young man seems to depend on a capacity, so to speak, to pull up one's roots (or to discard one's shoes) in the very act of walking. Malouf appears here to be laying the foundations for a species of *ascensional* materialism, which comes across as a form of spirituality starting from — rather than negating — the reality of raw matter. In cultural terms this implies an acknowledgement of heritage, prior to taking the challenge of change. That the more conservative forces in society (the same ones, presumably, which refused to address the puzzle presented by Gemmy) balk at this sort of challenge, is apparent in their self-righteous indignation at the sight of the Hutchence house, which is then resented for 'the humiliation of the scraper' and for 'the strange mixture of embarrassment and wonder that had come to them when they looked back and saw the prints they had left, big-toed and dusty on the boards' (p. 85).

For the house is indeed like Gemmy in that it represents, more like an ideal point of reference than an active principle, the condition of transcendence after which Malouf is constantly hankering. It is significant that it should be thought exotic with its combination of architectural influences, 'from the Islands, from Macao, or maybe it was Malacca' (p. 83); but it is above all its 'lacy lightness' (p. 83), 'the cool superiority with which it [lays] claim to light and air' (p. 84) as it hovers above ground on its stumps, which inspires Abbot to 'escape from his own nature' (p. 81) and which relieves him 'of his bear-like heaviness and rough colonial

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boots' (p. 81). Once again, however, it is worth pointing out that the house, like the figure of Gemmy haunting the settlement, provides no more than an appropriate environment for a metamorphosis initiated by an exercise in (self-)scrutiny:

[George Abbot] was filled with a sense of his own lightness. Some heavier self had been laid asleep in him, and another woken that was all open to the westering glow in which the drab bush trees along his way found a kind of beauty, all their leaves glancing and the earth under them alight along its ridges, and the sky above a show, a carnival, of cloud shapes transforming themselves from forms he could name to others, equally pleasing, that he had no name for, but did not for that reason feel estranged from; he might, he thought, have a name for those later. He had the feeling that there were many things in the world that were still to come to him. (p. 92)

Abbot's receptiveness to the display of nature prefigures Ellen McIvor's wish, expressed some pages later, to enjoy a sight 'so rare, so miraculous even' (pp. 111-12), that it might be worth showing her daughters, just as she herself was shown a tightrope walker by her father when she was a child. The evocation of the tightrope walker ties up some loose ends in the novel's imagery, since it endorses the notion that it sometimes takes 'a show, a carnival' to pull down the barriers erected in self-defence against the shock of change; while on the other hand it echoes the figure of Gemmy whose moment of perfect poise on the boundary fence of the settlement points to a possible balance between opposites. Taken together, the various threads woven into the image of the funambulist suggest that the impact of experience on a soul made permeable to the outside world might give it the desired impulsion towards an envisaged condition of (internal) difference, (paradoxical) heterogeneity, (resolved) hybridity.

This state of sameness-in-difference, difference-in-sameness is further evoked in a cluster of images connoting the life of the bees. The bush honey 'gathered from all the surrounding country' (p. 141) provides an illustration of a synthesis of elements *in the natural world*, which results in a trope of sameness in flux since the precious stuff, collected into a 'heavy scoop of gold in the bowl of a spoon' (p. 141), overflows into a transparent thread which, 'in its slow falling, [. . .] hung and did not fall' (p. 141). This is in keeping with the complex nature of 'the many-minded, one-minded swarm' (p. 192), which seems to constitute Malouf's natural metaphor for the ideal of self-transformation to be approximated by human beings. That the bees offer an example meant to be observed and imitated, is suggested by the fact that Janet's hives, when she becomes a world-expert in bees, are made of glass 'so that an observer could see through to all that was going on in them, all the events and organised procedures and rituals of another life' (p. 191). The paradox is that Malouf should draw from the world of nature his image

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of an unattainable ideal meant to remain, by definition, out of this world. Thus the children planting their boots in front of the transparent pane of glass seem to be catching a glimpse of 'the City of God' (p. 191), as designed by 'little furry angels with a flair for geometry' (p. 192). Sister Monica (Janet's new name as a nun) sees it as her particular vocation to crack the code inscribed in the hive as a 'world of pure geometry, of circles, half-circles, hexagons, figures-of-eight' (p. 199). In as much as the geometrical figures described by the bees testify to their 'power [. . .] of *communicating*' (p. 192), Janet's attempts to crack the code amount to deciphering some sort of stylized, stereotypical language of the Other.

In the last analysis, of course, 'the moment of illumination when she will again be filled with [the single mind of the hive]' (p. 199) is projected beyond the pale of representation — it is rejected outside the book's pages — so that *Remembering Babylon* once again points to the ineluctability of cultural limits. Indeed the novel's mystical/metaphysical drive can probably be understood as an admission of defeat in the struggle for apprehending, let alone representing, the Other: we must approach one another, Malouf concludes, '[a]s we approach knowledge', and '[a]s we approach prayer' (p. 200). This makes a virtue of faith, which is presented as a prerequisite in the search for transcendence; in effect, the reader is asked to approach the book itself with something in the nature of faith, failing which the pursuit of 'the whole thing' falters and halts in the realm of mere language. One is reminded here of the words of George Steiner: '[T]he wager on the meaning of meaning, on the potential of insight and response when one human voice addresses another, when we come face to face with the text and work of art or music, which is to say when we encounter *the other* in its condition of freedom, is a wager on transcendence'.⁴⁴ Similarly, in *Remembering Babylon* the reader is asked to believe in the 'real presence' of another order of existence, which is 'unnamed as yet' (p. 194) — which the book circumvents rather than circumscribes — even though there is some confidence that there might be a name for it later (see p. 92). However poetic his literary style, it is part of the writer's condition that his work must be 'coded in a code of the world'⁴⁵ (if only so that it might get into print), with the result that the mind cannot be thrust so easily 'into a channel of the formerly unknowable, because then unimaginable'.⁴⁶

Yet this is not to deny the very real political import of *Remembering Babylon*, which is signalled in the fact that 'its characters have names that resonate in settler history: Lachlan

⁴⁴ George Steiner, *Real Presences: is there anything in what we say?* (London: Faber & Faber, 1989), p. 4.

⁴⁵ In the words of the New Zealand novelist Janet Frame, *The Carpathians* (London: Pandora Press, 1989), p. 48.

⁴⁶ Frame, *The Carpathians*, p. 12.

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Beattie, McIvor, Frazer'.⁴⁷ That someone like Lachlan, for example, should be called upon to preside over the country's destiny, in ready acceptance of 'the active, overbearingly male part' of public life (p. 183), seems to derive in straight line from Gemmy's gift to him of a conception of power based on the recognition of his authority: '[B]ecause, one day, the authority he [Lachlan] had claimed by raising the stick to his shoulder would be real' (p. 37). At the same time, Gemmy's appearance on the scene points to 'some new set of rules', as if 'this blackfeller's arrival among them was to be the start of something' (p. 15) — which suggests that the very stuff of public life might be transformed in time. This bears relevance to the issue of the book's post-coloniality. We have suggested that Malouf's endeavour to flesh out a frame of transformed identity, supposedly uncontaminated by Eurocentric concepts or images, was hailed as a distinctly post-colonial move on the part of a resolutely Australian writer. Yet it should be clear by now that Malouf leans towards universalism when he rips away the pageantry of conventions to outline a vision of 'naked essential humanity' (p. 179) of which '[o]ur poor friend Gemmy is a forerunner' (p. 132), and in which separate individuals of all backgrounds '[a]re' inextricably joined and [will] always be' (p. 197). Thus, although the work is firmly rooted in the thick of a particular historical/cultural situation, it is energized by a desire for transcendence which takes it in the utopian, ahistorical region of '*the great banquet at which we are guests, the common feast*' (p. 130). This ultimately counters the historicist/culturalist mood which prevails in much literary-theoretical discourse nowadays. And if Malouf's perception that the Other can never speak for itself as Other seems to fit into a certain pattern specific to post-modern thought, it effectively precludes the possibility of post-colonial identity (which bets on the viability of autonomous difference). Instead, Malouf rehearses patterns of development which point to a definite commonality of experience between all his characters. To be sure, his universalism is controversial in a post-colonial context which insists on the need to go through a process of self-apprehension defined in one's own terms. Whether or not such polemic was intended by a writer so centrally concerned by the matter of Australia,⁴⁸ and no matter if one sees in this particular kind of self-centredness a form of political hubris or of paradoxical humility, *Remembering Babylon* has the merit of making one wonder which is the most effective way of getting 'in touch now with [one's] other life' (p. 200).

⁴⁷ Perera, 'Unspeakable Bodies', 18.

⁴⁸ See David Malouf, 'Notes and Documents', *Australian Literary Studies*, 12. 2 (October 1985), 265-68.